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ABSTRACT

During the 1920's merit pay became the most preferred system of teacher compensation; however, today fewer than 4 percent of the school systems in the United States use merit pay plans. The National Education Association suggests that merit pay is a "bogus issue" obscuring more significant areas of education needing reform, and the American Federation of Teachers has listed a series of preconditions that would have to be met prior to any consideration of merit pay. Declaring merit ratings educationally unsound, the Virginia Board of Education proposed the identification of meritorious schools and the reward of all the teachers in those schools. On the other hand, a national poll of teachers found that two-thirds favor the basic tenets of merit pay, and 61 percent of all respondents in the 15th annual Gallop Poll voted for teacher pay on the basis of quality of work. The factor common to groups opposed to teacher merit pay is the fear of unfair evaluation criteria. In 1963, long before becoming U.S. Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell proposed 20 measures for assuring teacher acceptance of merit pay. Among these are establishing an objective system of coded observations of teaching performance and allowing teachers to review their evaluation files. (MLF)

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PROS AND CONS AND CURRENT STATUS OF MERIT PAY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Paper Presented to the Annual Conference
of the West Virginia Association of Teacher Educators,
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by

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PROS AND CONS AND CURRENT STATUS OF MERIT PAY
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Addressing the merit pay recommendation of the National Commission on Excellence[8], a vocational education teacher from Michigan wrote, "To think that merit pay would come close to solving any of the problems in education today is to think that a Band-Aid will cure heart disease." Likewise, 61% of Michigan's teachers reject the concept. Among those endorsing merit pay, four-fifths felt that teachers should help decide who should receive it, 60% saw a role for principals, 39% included student opinion, and 15% wanted school board members to be involved.[6]

Contrary to the Michigan inquiry, a national poll of teachers conducted by the Journal of the National School Boards Association found that two-thirds of all U. S. teachers favor the basic tenets of merit pay. Regardless of age, sex, marital status, region of the country, union membership or non-union, educational level, years of experience, tenured or nontenured the conclusion was the same. Who should evaluate teacher effectiveness and how it should be done; however, were not supported as consistently.

Defining merit pay as, "a monetary stipend or salary increase paid for superior performance, as determined by a classroom performance evaluation," the poll asked who should decide merit and what criteria should be used. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents wanted principal evaluations, 25.4% wanted teaching

peers, 15% wanted the department head, 12.1% a curriculum specialist, and 3% wanted "outsiders" and various others to decide. Among the criteria used for merit pay determination, 41% of the respondents favored classroom effectiveness and senority/ academic credits, with equal weight on each. Nearly 27% of the others agreed to these two criteria, with greater weight being placed on classroom effectiveness. Eleven and one-half percent preferred classroom effectiveness and seniority/credits, with greater weight given to seniority/academic credits, and only 17.6% wanted seniority and academic credits to be the only criterion. Using classroom effectiveness as the only standard for merit pay considerations was favored by only 3.1% of the teachers.[9]

The fifteenth annual Gallop Poll asked the general public to respond to the question, "Should each teacher be paid on the basis of the quality of his or her work, or should all teachers be paid on a standard scale basis?" Sixty-one percent of all respondents (as opposed to 58% in 1970) voted for teacher pay on the basis of quality of work and 31% (as opposed to 36% in 1970) voted for the standard scale. Among parents with children in nonpublic schools, 64% favored merit pay while 30% favored a standard scale.[4]

The idea of providing merit pay for teachers has been around throughout the twentieth century. The first formal plan was devised in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1908, and during the 1920's it became the most preferred system of teacher compensation.

Today fewer than 4% of the school systems in the United States use merit pay plans.[3] The most commonly reported reasons for abandonment have been problems with evaluation and dissension in the ranks.[10]

Terrel H. Bell took a position fovoring merit pay long before becomming U. S. Secretary of Education. In 1963, based on his experience as superintendent of a county school district in Utah and a five year state-supported study in five pilot districts in Utah, he proposed twenty measurers for assuring teacher acceptance of merit pay. He listed the following.

1. Admit teachers to evaluation for merit pay only through written application.
2. Allow teachers to withdraw from evaluation or stipend phase by written notice.
3. Provide a base salary that is competitive with neighboring districts.
4. Provide merit stipends from revenue sources other than those used for basic salaries.
5. Set standards for merit pay eligibility before admitting teachers to candidacy.
6. Establish an objective system of coded observation of teaching performance using trained observers who record data but make no qualitative judgments.
7. Use a statistically valid method of relating recorded data on teacher performance to the standards already published.
8. Allow teachers to review their evaluation files frequently by meeting with merit study personnel not involved in salary decisions.
9. Make merit pay decisions only after the teacher reviews his file, decides he is ready for a decision, and requests in writing that a decision be made.

10. Appoint one person to review files, compare the data with the standards, and interview the candidates concerning the decision.

11. Make all merit decisions tentative so those who do not qualify will be encouraged to continue a program of improvement and possibly qualify later.

12. Establish an appeal board composed of teachers and administrators.

13. Use principals and supervisors as observers and data recorders only, not as "merit raters."

14. Emphasize free choice to participate or not to participate.

15. Allow teachers to reveal their participation/ qualification at their own discretion; make no announcements and publish no lists.

16. Use the same observation system to evaluate all teachers, but apply more intensive evaluation and data gathering procedures (12 to 16 observations) for merit pay candidates.

17. Allow special consideration for variables such as overcrowding or poor facilities which cannot be controlled by the teacher.

18. Consider extra, out-of-class activities the teacher performs to support the school.

19. Recognize differences in personality and needs for recognition as well as extra pay.

20. Do not claim precise measurement of competence, but try to convey an effort to be objective, fair, and honest.

Bell theorized that effective implementation of a merit pay plan using these principles would satisfy those who object to paying "the worst at the level of the best in order to pay the best what they deserve."[1]

While acknowledging that the merit pay controversy could serve as a "useful lightning rod" drawing attention to the question of teacher quality and remuneration, the National

Education Association suggests that merit pay is a "bogus issue" obscuring more significant areas of education needing reform. Taking the position that the issue confronting serious education reformers is that "the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable," the NEA called for attention in teacher preparation, inservice training, class size, availability of materials and supplies, and incentives such as sabbaticals, scholorships and grants, and relief from clerical duties to make teaching more attractive.[5]

To substantiate the serious administrative problems, reduction of morale, and the creation of dissension and jealousy which caused over half of the districts using merit pay programs (10% of all U. S. school systems in the 1960's) to discontinue their use, the NEA cited a no-win situation between two school districts where one withheld the names of teachers judged meritorious, thus preventing their serving as "models," and where the other experienced a "disaster" for having released the names. Further, they questioned the selection process which undermined the self-confidence of a majority of teachers who would not be identified as "meritorious."[2]

The American Federation of Teachers has listed a series of preconditions that would have to be met prior to any consideration of merit pay. These included: 1) tests and standards for all beginning teachers; 2) tougher teacher certification requirements; 3) a $6,000 to $8,000 increase in first year teachers' salaries; 4) fewer and more generous salary steps; 5) better classroom

discipline; and 6) fair and practical methods for removing incompetent teachers. Once these have been satisfied, the conditions that they want built into the merit plan include: 1) a higher base pay for all teachers; 2) negotiated evaluation systems with protection against subjectivity and local school politics; 3) no loss of tenure, job security, or status for teachers who do not receive extra pay; 4) appeal and review procedures that are fair and objective; 5) comprehensive plan showing committment to improving the conditions and pay of teachers; 6) voluntary and open program available to all, with discretionary pay awarded to a substantial portion of the staff; 7) compensation not subject to decrease later; 8) evaluation criteria reflective of all factors contributing to teacher and student success; and 9) programs not imposed but accepted by local teacher unions through collective bargaining or other appropriate action.[7]

Although the idea of merit pay may make perfect sense to most school boards, administrators, tax payers, and even teachers, implementing a successful program requires great skill in human relations and management. Citing several school systems where it is working, Cramer emphasized caution regarding the following issues.

1) Where merit programs have failed it was largely due to weak or unfair evaluation.

   Evaluation criteria should include individual performance in the classroom, how teachers work with pupils, parents, and colleagues, how they work

in a team, how they work to improve curriculum within the system, and a section on creativity. Teachers need a strong voice in selection of performance criteria (which should be more challenging at increasing levels of education and experience). All teachers who meet the goals agreed upon, and most do, should receive merit awards, some being rewarded more than others.

2) A major problem is lack of funds.

> Rewarding a few and punishing the majority, who receive little praise throughout their careers, can lead to disaster. Wanting to be cautious and start out with a small program hoping it will expand will not work; the entire staff should be included in initial considerations. The amount offered must provide a real incentive.[3]

Having found the basic reasons for introducing merit pay programs to be instructional improvement, rewarding excellence and punishing incompetence, motivation, attracting and retaining good teachers, and improving teacher morale, the Report of the Virginia Board of Education declared merit ratings educationally unsound for the following reasons.

1. Cannot fairly evaluate effectiveness of teaching.
2. Merit ratings reward conformity.
3. Merit ratings put a premium on absence of teacher problems.
4. Fosters a competitive rather than a cooperative spirit.
5. Undermines the security of teachers.
6. Disregards teaching environment.
7. Cannot improve the quality of education.

As a means of overcoming these weaknesses in individual merit rating plans, the report proposed the identification of meritorious schools wherein all teachers would be rewarded for the success of their school.[10]

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